

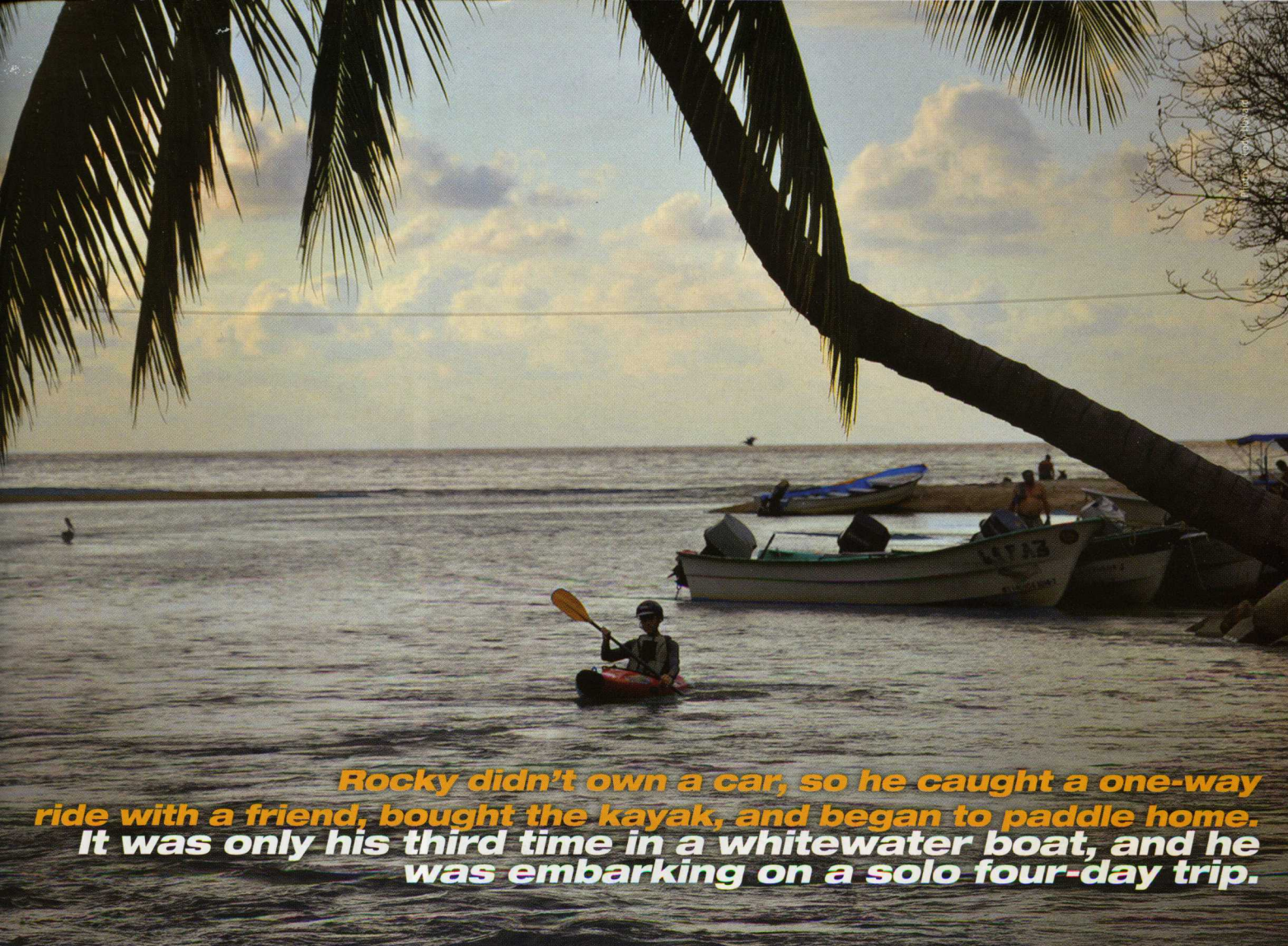
ROCKY CONTOS

A Different Perspective

Rocky Contos follows his own unique line, methodically notching big-time adventures while remaining in relative obscurity. His quirky nature and off-beat approach to paddling have produced a resume full of peculiar adventures, but it is Rocky's exploration of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental that sets him apart. A region of deep gorges, exotic plant life, withdrawn mountain cultures, and high-quality whitewater, the Sierra Madre is a treasure chest of adventure paddling, and Rocky Contos has found the key. His roughneck name is just part of the Rocky Contos anomaly—a paddler with a boxer's appellation, a marathoner's body, a scientist's mind, and an explorer's heart.

Words: Tyler Williams

Photography: Courtesy of Rocky Contos, J.D. Batove, Cody Howard, Alex Chong and Barbara Conboy



Rocky didn't own a car, so he caught a one-way ride with a friend, bought the kayak, and began to paddle home. It was only his third time in a whitewater boat, and he was embarking on a solo four-day trip.

Whenever possible, Rocky paddles rivers all the way to their mouths at the sea, sometimes even paddling miles up or down the coast to the nearest road, as he does here on the Rio Horcones, near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

Pacific Coast - Michoacan Mexico - October 2001, 5 pm: Exhausted from four days of paddling down an unknown river, a solo kayaker drifts out the mouth of the Rio Coalcoman. He squints into a low sun, quickly reading the ocean break as a river current ushers him toward it. A low wall of whitewash approaches, and he crosses it with a relaxed, practiced motion: angle the boat, lift the knees, thrust the hips, take a stroke; he has made this same move a hundred times in the past few days, but now the water is different, bigger, stronger. A second wave nears, and his paddling rhythm picks up speed. He clears this second wave, barely, in a flash of spray, and looks wide-eyed out to sea. There, a swell builds.

Its hulking shape heaps into an unnaturally vertical pitch, poised beyond the laws of gravity. The kayaker whirls his paddle, climbing straight up the growing wave face toward its crest, and salvation. Inches from the top, he hears a crackling sound, sees a flash of white, and then all goes black.

Slammed onto his head beneath the falling curtain of water, his paddle is ripped from his grasp, and a tumbling ensues. Pitch-poled and window-shaded, the random tossing finally stops long enough for him to execute a hand roll. He gulps air and scans the scene for his paddle just as the next wave arrives. He is over again. Two trundlings later, it's time to punch out of the boat. He swims parallel to the beach, trying to escape a rip current that is holding him in a wash cycle from Hell.

A wave crushes him to the sandy bottom where he pushes off—back to air—and manages a few swimming strokes before the breaker-bound rip current delivers him, again, to the incoming waves. Minutes go past, his paddle re-appears nearby, and he makes it to the edge of the rip zone. Bodysurfing to shore, he crawls his way to solid sand.

His prospects for the oncoming night are not good. His boat, containing his sleeping bag, tent, wallet, clothes, food—everything—is still out at sea, tossing in the thundering break. He thinks, momentarily, about swimming out to retrieve it, but his better judgment prevails. Lights from a fishing village twinkle down the shoreline. He begins to jog towards them.

Lifejacket and bootie-clad, he asks frantically about the village for a panga boat driver who might make a rescue of the adrift kayak, but none are around, and the blackness of tropical night is descending. He finds a place to sleep behind the police station, in their hammock. There is no mosquito netting, and he is injected many times during the sultry night by the proboscises of dengue-fever-carrying mosquitoes.

In the morning, still no panga drivers volunteer to drive the strangely dressed foreigner out to sea. The kayaker borrows money to make bus fare back to the mountains, the put-in, and his pickup truck. Returning to the beach village days later, he asks if any of the fishermen have seen his boat. "Yes," they say, "Lacho has it." Relieved, the kayaker tracks down Lacho and asks after his boat. Lacho denies ever seeing it. Right about then, the Dengue begins to kick in.

The paddler was Rocky Contos, and the adventure was one of many epics he has survived during an eventful paddling career. James John Achilles "Rocky" Contos was born on the eve of Halloween, a date that seems a perfect match for this kayaker who doesn't fit any mold. The "Rocky" moniker comes from his father, John, in exaltation of Rocky Marciano, the heavyweight champ who inspired the Hollywood movie "Rocky." In many ways, the slightly built, high-pitched, academically groomed Rocky Contos doesn't match the pugilist name at all, but in other ways the title suits him perfectly. His upbringing was blue-collar. Mom waited tables. Dad fixed copy machines. On weekends, his father inner-tubed the Kern River with a case of beer and a cadre of buddies. Rocky was too young to join the float trips, but the promise of moving water was enough to spark his young mind to the possibilities of river running. The idea would simmer throughout his childhood in San

His fascination began in the fifth grade, when a teacher extolled the virtues of a healthy diet and active life. "This really defined much of my lifestyle to the present," Rocky says of his teacher's health initiative. "Since that time, I have always been a voracious consumer and connoisseur of fruits. Every morning I eat only fruit, and usually large quantities." He joined the California rare fruit growers association at age fourteen. In high school, his fruit fascination led him to study plant science and chemistry, earning him a scholarship to the University of California at Davis.

Rocky's introduction to kayaking came through a college-sponsored adventure program. Although he had taken an inflatable kayak down the Russian River during high school (Interestingly, this was the same river where kayaking legend Lars Holbek first paddled in



Photos © J.D. Baird

Rocky's whitewater paddling for the past 9 years has been focused on exploring new runs in Mexico, running drops like Cascada El Perron 2 on the Rio Arteaga, Michoacan.

the American that convinced him to buy his own boat. A used Perception Mirage—with skirt and paddle—was for sale in Lake Natoma, California, one hundred miles away by road. Rocky didn't own a car, so he caught a one-way ride with a friend, bought the kayak, and began to paddle home. It was only his third time in a whitewater boat, and he was embarking on a solo four-day trip. Garbage bags waterproofed his gear. Riverside blackberries provided sustenance. He passed Class II rapids with relief, and then ran into horrendous headwinds as he penetrated the Coast Range, where he was tipped over amidst three-foot chop. Unable to hit his first-ever combat roll, he swam the waterlogged boat a quarter-mile to shore.

It was the start of many bold adventures undertaken with antiquated boats. After the Mirage came a Dancer. Even today, he's often found paddling a Dagger Freefall, a Prijon Rockit, or a Wave Sport Extreme—all decent boats, but all from the last century. Rocky has never owned a new boat, and rarely has he ever paid more than \$200 for a kayak. He seems to thrive on taking unwanted plastic, and using it beyond repair, like grabbing over-ripe fruit off the vine. Call it practical, call it cheap—it's all Rocky. His beater boats

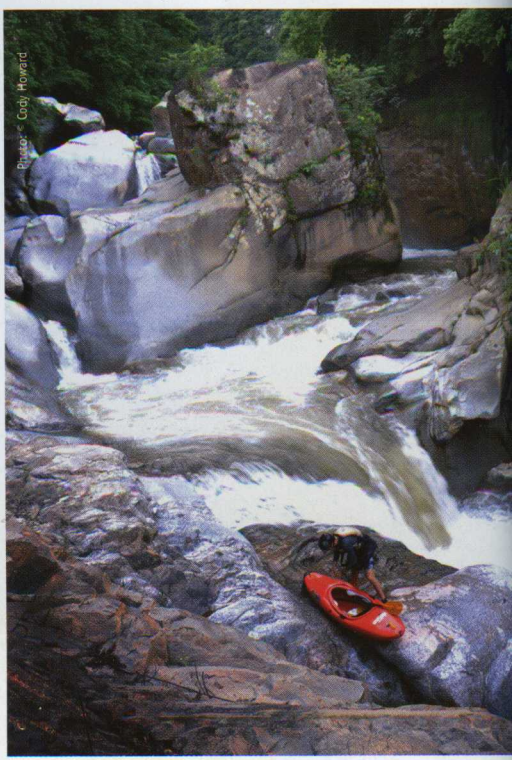
paired nicely with his ragged wetsuit when Rocky turned up, often alone, at various put-ins throughout California during the early '90s. His older brother, Mike, accompanied Rocky some of the time. When Rocky concocted particularly hair-brained schemes, like running the Eel River at 300,000 cfs, Mike drove shuttle.

Rocky has always been drawn to high water, because, he says, "That's when you feel the river the most." He once paddled Idaho's Middle Fork, Main, and Lower Salmon Rivers—a distance of 355 miles—in three and a half days, riding a flood that crested at 93,000 cfs. Rocky took a sea kayak, and made the run solo. This high water success, however, was built on a foundation of hard lessons learned early in his paddling career.

On New Years Day 1997, the highest water in the recorded history of California was at hand, and Rocky was coming off a holiday with family, having watched rain pour down for days. He was ready to feel the river. The Eel River access road was under water, so brother Mike dropped Rocky at a flooded tributary creek. The main river was so high that it humped into a ridge at its center, where it zoomed along at



Rocky at sunset along Bahia Magdalena



Portages are part of the game in river exploration.

Rocky's scientific approach to researching rivers has paid huge dividends. In total, he has made more than 60 first descents in Mexico. Many are bound for classic status.

twenty miles per hour. Eddies were debris-clogged swamps in the forest. Fortunately, Rocky was able to catch one on river right above a blind corner. He scouted the bend, saw that it was clean, and returned to his boat. It was gone. Apparently a random surge of flood water had snatched the kayak from the woods, and Rocky's only means of escape from the river canyon now lay with a train track—located on the other side of the river. Swimming a flood of 300,000 cfs is borderline suicide, but Rocky saw a way, and against his better judgment, he made the swim across. Darkness fell as he walked the tracks to a road-end house, where he was welcomed inside for a plate of fish tacos.

Rocky wrote about this and other misadventures on the 1990s internet forum rec.boats.paddle, gaining him dubious renown within a boating community that neither knew him or understood him. His analytical approach to river running translated into overly detailed accounts of trips in which he documented everything from cfs to the amount of time spent on pee breaks. Although burdened with precision, his stories were difficult to ignore. How could you not read about a solo paddler swimming three times on a wilderness run, who chased his boat on foot for

a mile, and then hitchhiked across a mountain range to locate his semi-stolen truck? His trip reports were captivating and unsettling, often leaving fellow paddlers asking: Who is this guy? His meticulous descriptions and open opinions were threatening to some, just odd enough to seem as if he were mocking the sport. Backlash came in the form of parody pieces that imitated his writing style, and Rocky was blindsided by the criticism. "I was completely honest with what I wrote, including the negative experiences that were my fault," he says today, still with a touch of naiveté.



Rocky eating a mango on the first descent of the Rio Ameca.

Photo: © Barbara Conboy

His endurance is an obvious advantage for Rocky's exploration of wild rivers, a passion that only intensified after he earned his doctorate in 1999. The following year, he began to chase a dream that has put him in an elite class of river explorers—documenting the rivers of Mexico's Sierra Madre. The idea began in 1994, when Rocky picked up a book called Mexico's Copper Canyon. The coffee table book showed color photographs of towering waterfalls and deep river canyons, sometimes featuring intrepid rafters portaging through low-water boulder gardens. It didn't take much imagination to know that the rivers in the book would produce quality rapids with just a little more water, and Rocky started scheming immediately. "I realized that there was a ton of potential down there that nobody had ever seemed to look at," he remembers.

The negative reactions to Rocky's write-ups might have been due to the many close calls he reported. Few paddlers have had as many near death experiences as Contos. On Colorado's notoriously sieve-laced Black Canyon of the Gunnison, he made a decisive swim into an eddy at the lip of a log-choked chute. On California's South Trinity, he pinned for a full minute, washed free, and then swam under a log before reaching shore. In the Kern River's Royal Flush Rapid, he washed into a cave, swam, and took off his lifejacket in order to escape out the bottom.

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Some of it had been looked at, but most of it had not been paddled. The few attempts at genuine whitewater reconnaissance in northern Mexico had ended in

low-water disappointment or logistical breakdown. Most river running there had occurred with inflatables during low-water conditions, in the winter. The rainy season in the Sierra Madre, and hence the whitewater season, occurs from July through September, a time when most North American paddlers are migrating north to follow snowmelt cycles. Add to this the rampant stories of armed guards protecting illicit drug crops along the rivers, and enthusiasm for probing new runs in the Sierra Madre remained subdued. And then Rocky Contos arrived.

Full-time kayaking had to take a back seat to research, however, as Rocky pursued a doctorate in neuroscience at the University of California San Diego. He made the most of his paddling opportunities by running rain-swollen creeks during winter rainstorms, some of which were first descents. To stay in shape, he kayak surfed the ocean break. Most days, however, were spent in the lab. Another graduate student at UCSD was speech pathologist Barb Conboy. She had met Rocky years earlier in a sea kayaking class. When the two re-connected, she asked him about paddling, and fruit. They were married three years later.

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His many close calls aren't indicative of his paddling skills, or a lack of focus, but they do reflect his style. Most of Rocky's biggest mishaps happened during his development as a class V paddler, when he admittedly paddled over his head in his quest for exploration. Add the solo factor, and the recipe for disaster was complete. Looking back on his early mishaps, he says, "Those experiences definitely shape one's outlook on paddling." After a contemplative pause, he continues, "I don't know, you live and learn."

Despite his budding romance and busy graduate studies, Rocky found time to escape on ambitious kayaking missions. He paddled the Grand Canyon; solo, in eight days, during mid-winter. He did the Kern River from its headwaters, carrying his kayak over a 12,000-foot pass to access the six-day run. Contos is oddly attracted to such Herculean efforts. Along with his fruit devotion comes a dedication to physical fitness, and he's got the body to match the desire. He once ran a marathon in 2:44, and has completed several "double centuries" on a bicycle, riding 200 miles in a day. When not on an expedition, Rocky runs five miles per day. As a regular part of his diet, he fasts one day per week, and one week per year.

In July 2000, he drove to the popular beach resort of Mazatlan, enrolled in a Spanish language class for a few weeks, and then headed into the mountains. His first goal was the Rio Piaxtla, an un-run stream that dropped a mellow 40 feet per mile. (In 2009, Contos returned to paddle the upper Piaxtla—arguably, the deepest river gorge in North America.) The locals were friendly, and the river turned out to be pleasant Class III. He paddled for three days, all the way to the Pacific Ocean, caught a bus back to his truck, and headed for the next drainage south. This pattern continued through mid-October, culminating with a grand finale on the storied Rio Mezquital. When he started for home, he had paddled thirteen rivers, eleven of which were first descents. He was hooked.

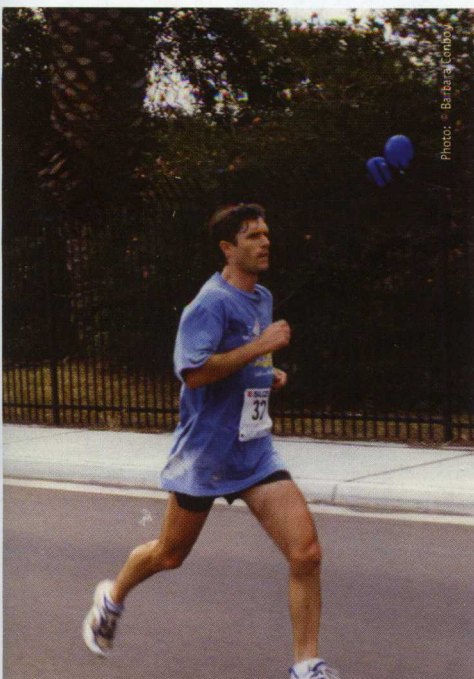


Photo: © Barbara Conboy



He puts on a river in the middle of nowhere, in the heart of hurricane season, in a huge old-school boat loaded with oranges, avocados, and almonds, and blithely paddles into the unknown—alone.

Rocky has made his Mexican pilgrimage nearly every summer since. Each season, he travels south with a new list of potential runs; their gradients, lengths, access points, hydrographs, and notes he has written from Google Earth study. Rocky's scientific approach to researching rivers has paid huge dividends. In total, he has made over 60 first descents in Mexico (over 120, he points out, if individual sections of rivers are counted separately). Many, like Copper Canyon's Chinipas, with its warm water, canyon scenery, sandy beaches, Class IV rapids, and hot springs, are bound for classic status.

Rocky has amassed nearly 6,000 miles of river travel in Mexico, everything from endless flatwater on the lower Yaqui to 400 foot-per-mile portage fests on the Huevachic. Rocky sees it all, because he runs extended lengths of Mexican rivers, not just the highlights. His friend Tom Diegel, who has paddled with Rocky more than anyone, paints a concise picture of how Contos operates. "He puts on a river in the middle of nowhere,

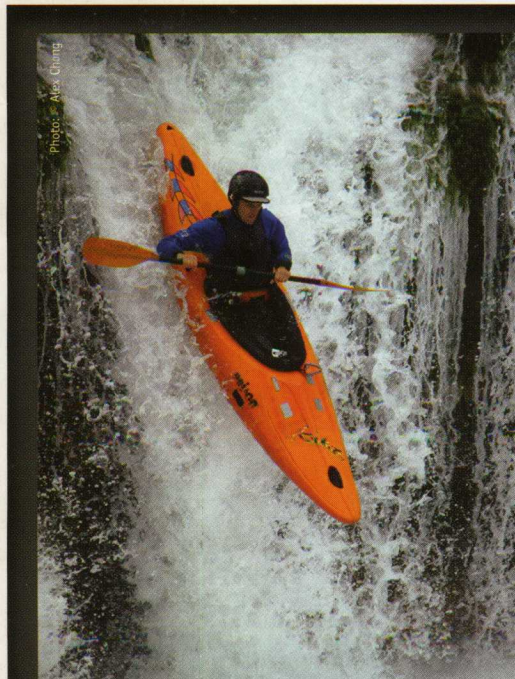
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Along the way, Contos identifies different access points with pinpoint precision. This is partly due to his inclination toward detail, but he also has loftier motives at work. The first of four Mexican guidebooks that Contos plans to produce is due out in 2010. Already, a plethora of information is posted on his website, sierrarios.org, where an interactive map illustrates a web of rivers, each with a few notes posted by the man who is the primary source of whitewater information there—Rocky Contos.

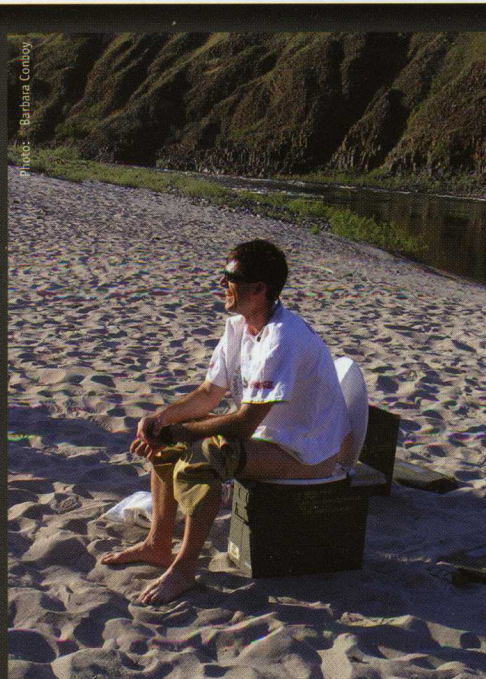
Obviously, Contos doesn't need companions for his river quests, but that is not say that he is opposed to company. Numerous random paddlers have accompanied Rocky over the years, and since word of his Mexican discoveries has spread, more top-level paddlers have emerged to sign up for Contos' adventures.

Three years ago, I got word that a kayaker named Rocky was traveling 1,500 miles to run an obscure river canyon in my own backyard. Skeptical, I called him only to learn that he knew the put-in, the right water level, the time needed—his whole plan was pretty solid. My wife, Lisa, and I joined him for the four-day run. Every morning while we drank coffee, we'd listen to some crazy Rocky story, and watch while he ate his dates and oranges, pulled from somewhere deep in the recesses of a borrowed boat (a cracked Pyranha 240). We would then discuss his options for getting his kayak out of Grand Canyon from the mouth of the Little Colorado River Gorge, the next run on his list for that week. None of the standard approaches suited him. He seemed to be looking for something original, something different. In the end, he eschewed the complicated raft haul-outs and shuttle schedules we had suggested, and simply shouldered his boat and walked out of the 4,000-foot gorge. One thing we did convince him of was to not paddle one hundred miles of flatwater to the next run, but to drive to the standard put-in instead. Unsure whether or not he would take our advice, we waved goodbye, and watched Rocky paddle away. His solitary form shrank slowly from view, amidst an encroaching gorge, bound for adventure.

A. Different



Rocky running a waterfall on the El Salto run of the Rio Valles, San Luis Potosi.



Rocky giving a very complete groover demo to a group of friends about start on a Salmon River trip.



While Rocky enjoys drops like Cacada El Perron3 on the Rio Artega, the most important thing to him is the greater adventure.



Rocky and his wife of 7 years, Barbara Conboy.



Surfing a wave on the first descent of Rio Batopilas, Chihuahua.



Rocky picking ripe wild cherries along the Salmon River in Idaho.



◉ Tyler Williams

Tyler Williams is an expedition paddler, whitewater historian, and author of four books including *Whitewater Classics—Fifty North American Rivers Picked by the Continent's Leading Paddlers*. He is a regular contributor to *Kayak Session*. For more information on Tyler, please visit www.funhoggpress.com